On Equivocation

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Equivocation is often described as a fallacy. In this short note I shall argue that it is not a logical concept but an epistemic one. The argument of one who equivocates is not logically flawed, but it is unpersuasive. Only arguments which are unpersuasive in a certain way involve equivocations.

It is instructive to begin with someone else's definition, and one which is intended to be unexceptionable to all parties:

> We equivocate when we intend a term to be read univocally even though it is ambiguous.[1]

Of course, this will not do as it stands, because on this definition, which gives a sufficient condition, we would be equivocating every time we used an ambiguous term with the intention of saying something unambiguous. But the biology teacher who tells his pupils 'Bats are mammals' is clearly not equivocating. Nor will it shore things up to say that there must be two tokens of the ambiguous term, which are intended to be read univocally, or even to require that the ambiguous term be the middle term in an inference, since the biology teacher still does not equivocate when he argues:

1. Bats are mammals.
2. Bats fly.
3. So, some mammals fly.

It is possible to (mis)understand this inference so that it is invalid, but that is no fault of the biology teacher. Whether or not he is aware of the ambiguity, he is perfectly within his rights to intend the two occurrences of 'Bat' to be read univocally. Yet it would be very easy for him to argue in an obviously equivocal fashion:

1. Bats are mammals.
2. Bats have handles.
3. So, some mammals have handles.

What makes the intention of univocity acceptable in the first inference but not in the second? A common way of elucidating the prob-

[1] R. Sorensen, 'Logical Luck'. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, **48**, Number 192 (July 1998), 319.

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lem with the second inference is to say that there is no reading of 'Bat' which makes both premises true. However, that cannot be sufficient to make the inference equivocal, since any inference turning on the univocal reading of an ambiguous term which had a false premise would turn out equivocal, and changing 'fly' to 'swim' in the first inference does not make it equivocal. To strengthen the condition to require that there be no reading of the equivocal term on which the premises are compossible goes too far, since, on the one hand, there may be a possible world in which bats are mammals with handles, and on the other, there may be unequivocal inferences with individually impossible premises.

What really seems to be wrong with the second inference is that there is no univocal reading of 'Bat' which does not make one or other premise *obviously* false. If we read 'Bat' in such a way that 'Bats are mammals' is true, or at least reasonable to assert, then 'Bats have handles' is obviously not true and would be unreasonable to assert. But if we read 'Bat' to make 'Bats have handles' true, or reasonable, then the first premise is obviously not true. And the notion of obviousness is epistemological: there is no way of deciding whether the second inference is equivocal or not without reference to a body of knowledge. If the speaker intends the univocal reading to be the flying creatures, then he equivocates because he can have no reason to assert the second premise. If he intends the univocal reading to be the sporting instruments, then he equivocates because he can have no reason to assert the first premise. If he does not intend a univocal reading, then he does argue invalidly, but he does not equivocate. It follows that a defence against the charge of equivocation should take the form of giving reasons for each of the two premises under a univocal reading.

This analysis of equivocation will not quite do, since it overlooks that some equivocations are very subtle and hard to detect. In other words, in some equivocations, on at least one of the univocal readings, neither premise is *obviously* false, in fact both seem to be quite reasonable. To adapt an example of Nigel Warburton's:[2]

1. Equality between all people is impossible because of unavoidable individual differences.
2. Socialism presupposes equality between all people.
3. Therefore, socialism is mistaken.

We cannot tell, just by looking at it, whether this argument equivocates on 'equality'. There is a reading where 'equality' means

[2] N. Warburton, *Thinking from A to Z*, 2nd edition, (London: Routledge, 1998), 58.

uniformity of outcome, and another where it means equal desert or treatment, and someone proposing the argument must intend a univocal reading. Whether the argument equivocates depends upon whether, under at least one univocal reading, the proponent of the argument still has reasons for asserting *both* premises. The only way to find that out is to find out what her reasons are. Someone who puts forward an argument which equivocates has put forward an argument which is valid under the intended univocal intepretation. She may have even put forward a sound argument. But she fails to persuade because she is incapable of giving us reasons for accepting all the premises of the valid interpretation of the argument.

It might be objected that while these epistemic failings are sufficient for equivocation to occur, they are not a necessary condition, and that I am over-generalizing from a few examples. If it is not a necessary condition, then there should be counter-examples in which the subject has reasons for accepting both premises of at least one univocal reading of the argument. But that would be an example of someone who puts forward an argument which can be read as either valid or invalid, and who accepts the conclusion on the basis of having reasons for the premises *on one of the univocal interpretations which makes the argument valid*. However lousy her reasons, such a person is certainly not equivocating. If she is to equivocate, all interpretations of her argument as valid must be such that she lacks reasons for at least one premise.

When we see the epistemic nature of equivocation, we can also see that it is not limited to cases where there are two tokens of an ambiguous term, or even to arguments. Someone who makes an assertion containing an ambiguous term would be equivocating if he intended the term to be read one way, but his reasons for making the assertion only supported it when the ambiguous term was read the other way.

Recognizing that equivocation is an epistemic flaw, not a logical one, has consequences for the proper understanding of the relation between logic and good reasoning. Equivocation presupposes the existence of ambiguity. Ambiguity occurs when there are morphological types, tokens of which can take different semantic values.[3] In formal languages it is stipulated that all tokens of a given morphological type have the same semantic value. In natural languages, such a stipulation would be impossible, because we can make mistakes about the semantic values of our terms. One person meets

[3] This is necessary, not sufficient, because indexicals are not ambiguous.

John Doe socially, another reads his books. They successfully use his name to talk about him. This success depends upon an empirically defeasible assumption, namely that it was the same John Doe that each came into contact with. We could not make a stipulation here until we knew that it was the same person, so the stipulation could not protect us from equivocation since it would presuppose that we already had enough information to rule out equivocation.

Could there be equivocation in thought? It appears that would require there to be ambiguity in thought. Steven Pinker argues against this possibility as follows:[4]

> Another problem with using English as the medium of knowledge is that English sentences can be ambiguous. When the serial killer Ted Bundy wins a stay of execution and the headline reads 'Bundy Beats Date with Chair', we do a double-take because our mind assigns two meanings to the string of words. If one string of words in English can correspond to two meanings in the mind, meanings in the mind cannot be strings of words in English.

While superficially attractive, this argument assumes that discovering ambiguity is a matter of contemplating a form of words and simply 'seeing' that there are two or more possible interpretations. That may be the case for text-book ambiguities, but not for the ones involved in subtle equivocations. In such cases, often the only way to proceed is to show that the reasons given for one assertion require the key term to be read in one way, but the reasons given for the other assertion require it to be read in a slightly different way. Up until this point, our linguistic intuitions may have been blind to this subtle difference, for we had not contemplated how the two readings might come apart. And it seems that this sort of ambiguity might well have a counterpart in thought. We may be in a situation where we take ourselves to have reasons for two beliefs which share a common conceptual component (and we are thus inclined to make mediate inferences which turn upon this component), however, suitable critical reflection reveals that the reasons we have for one of these beliefs do not in fact support it, but rather support belief in a slightly different proposition.[5]

The situation would be something like this. John infers from his beliefs that Fa, and Fb and $a \neq b$ that at least two things are F. However, close inspection of his reasons show that he has grounds

[4] S. Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, (London: Penguin, 1997), 70.

[5] Mistakenly taking E to be evidence for H may sometimes involve a logical error, but often does not.

for Fa, but not for a closely related proposition F*a, and grounds for F*b but not for Fb. John's inference is valid, but he is in the epistemic situation of an equivocator, that is, he equivocates.[6]

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